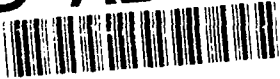


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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

Stick to the Basics:
Do Not Establish Air Combat Command as a Specified Command

by

Kevin E. Curry

Major, United States Air Force

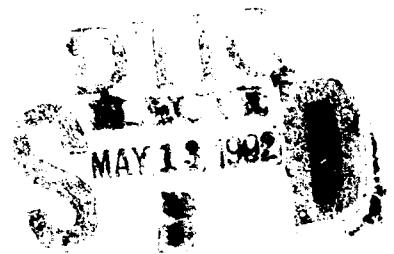
A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of the Air Force.

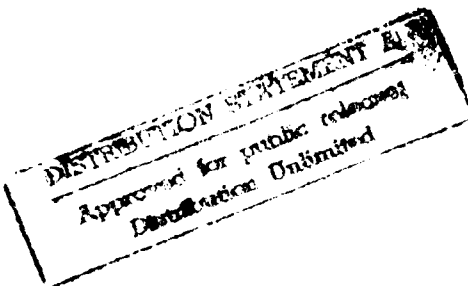
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| <p>The paper examines the controversy surrounding the recent Air Force proposal to establish Air Combat Command as a Specified Command. Using the effects on national warfighting capability as a measure of merit, the analysis concludes that such a designation is not prudent. Three factors support the conclusion. Proponents' arguments are misplaced; they support the ACC concept, but not combatant command status. In citing a precedent in FORSCOM, they point to a valid benefit of independent application of power during crisis response. Second, there is no valid broad continuing mission. Finally, establishment of ACC as a combatant command could decrease our warfighting skills by undermining unity of effort. A solution to the problem is posed in the analysis. Establishment of ACC as a USAF MAJCOM in supporting status, with forces assigned not only to Unified CINCs, but to FORSCOM as well, would preserve the crisis response capability, without undermining the intent of the Goldwater-Nichols DoD Reorganization Act of 1986.</p> | | | | | |
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ABSTRACT

The Air Force recently made a controversial proposal that its new Air Combat Command be established as a Specified Command. This analysis uses national warfighting capability as its measure of merit to examine the debate and concludes that establishing ACC as a combatant command is not prudent.

Three arguments make the point. First, the proponents' arguments for the proposal are misplaced; they support the ACC concept, but don't justify combatant command authority. Second, the requisite broad continuing mission does not exist. Finally, historical precedence has shown that the proposed arrangement would undermine unity of effort.

The proponents propose a one CINC, one mission concept. The analysis shows that conflicts of interest would leave CINACC with no incentive to provide joint priority platforms or training; air power application would be enhanced, but to the detriment of national capability. Citing the FORSCOM precedent, they argue the ability to independently apply air power during crisis response. This is a valid benefit.

The indivisibility of air power does not provide the requisite broad continuing mission--it is not a unique mission. And finally, Desert Storm underscored that Specified and Unified Command relationships can undermine unity of effort.

Establishing Air Combat Command as a USAF MAJCOM with some of its forces assigned to FORSCOM allows for all the benefits cited by proponents, is consistent with National Military Strategy, and adheres to the intent of Goldwater-Nichols.

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BACKGROUND

Against the backdrop of a vastly revised national security environment, the Air Force is undergoing a major reorganization. The emphasis is on streamlining and warfighting as the service draws down in recognition of the shrinking defense budget and post Cold War realities. The familiar institutions of Strategic Air Command (SAC), Tactical Air Command (TAC), and Military Airlift Command (MAC), are giving way to three new stanchions of power: Strategic Command (STRATCOM), Air Mobility Command (AMC), and Air Combat Command (ACC).

A short digression to compare the old and new structures is necessary to paint a better background picture. It will also provide a rudimentary case study for analysis, since the two systems are sufficiently similar that we can draw on past experience to formulate reasoned predictions for the future.

Though it has a modified force structure, STRATCOM has essentially the same mission SAC had--nuclear deterrence (and warfighting, should deterrence fail). In recognition of its added naval assets, however, STRATCOM will be a Unified Command where SAC was designated a Specified Command.

AMC has added tanker assets to its force list, but has retained virtually the same mission MAC had. AMC will be a supporting command, as was MAC. Importantly though, until the establishment of Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), MAC had been a Specified Command.

Finally, ACC has been established as USAF's combat arm. It will contain not only TAC's forces, but bombers, tankers, and war support platforms, as well. ACC is currently designated a supporting command, as was TAC.

The digression is complete and it brings us to issue at hand. The ACC aspect of the reorganization has left some Air Force factions uncomfortable.

In late December 1991, the USAF DCS for Plans and Operations (AF/XO), Lt Gen Michael Nelson, presented a briefing to the operations chiefs of all three services outlining a plan for ACC to be designated as a Specified Command.¹ The plan met with immediate criticism.

Charges of parochialism and contravention of the Goldwater-Nichols DoD Reorganization Act were leveled against the Air Force. By no means alone, former Undersecretary of Defense Lawrence Korb (now at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.) was among the critics. He called the plan "a very, very clever ploy by the Air Force to make themselves look good in (supporting) the joint arena. It means in war, Air Force planes would be run by an Air Force guy." ²

This is an emotional issue--one certain to be clouded by parochial concerns on all sides. It calls for a reasoned look at the issues. Are there justifiable reasons for giving ACC Specified Command status? Or are the critics right in arguing that this is an Air Force power-grab and a blatant attempt to undermine Goldwater-Nichols?

Measures of Merit. In order to weigh the arguments on this issue, the chosen discriminator must account for the fact that establishing ACC as Specified Command will impact national security. Unfortunately, there are a myriad of measures of national security. The relative importance of one over another is largely in the eye of the beholder.

The foundation of this analysis is that military organization, plans, and operations should be examined in light of their impact on *national* warfighting capabilities. In supporting this concept, our civilian leadership is unwavering and Joint Chiefs of Staff direction is unambiguous:

"Weapons, techniques, and intrinsic capabilities of each of the departments and Services must be fully used and exploited in any military situation where this will contribute effectively to the attainment of overall objectives. . . [The forces] will be employed to support and supplement the other Services. . . ."3

They clearly indicate that operations should enhance our national capability to wage war and to provide for the common defense, *whether the forces are composed of one service or more than one.* It is in that context that this analysis will evaluate the issues.

THESIS AND DISCUSSION

After carefully weighing the arguments on both sides it is evident that Air Combat Command should not be established as a Combatant Command, though not entirely due to the reasons put forth by the critics. To begin with, the proponents' arguments are misplaced. They strongly endorse the ACC concept, but they don't justify Combatant Command status. Competing priorities in force acquisition and training objectives are but two of the problems. Next, there doesn't appear to be a "broad continuing mission" for ACC that would justify such a designation. This is especially true when the definition is expanded to include a concept of uniqueness. Finally, giving ACC combatant authority holds potential for actually *decreasing* warfighting potential by undermining Unity of Effort.

The supporting arguments are misplaced. Air Staff sources offer these advantages.* First, CINCACC would be solely responsible for doctrine, tactics, equipment, and training, ensuring complete focus on one mission, thus enhancing warfighting capability. Second, they cite a precedent in FORSCOM, arguing two benefits. Training forces centrally and providing them to the warfighting CINC as required would ensure we have the right forces for the right job at the right time. Additionally, CINCACC could employ forces worldwide on short notice in response to a crisis calling for immediate

* See Endnotes.

reaction from CONUS. Involving only one HQ in the operation would enhance security and planning.

These are powerful arguments that strongly endorse the Air Combat Command concept and the enhancement of the Air Force's ability to fight, but they don't meet the standard of enhancing *national* military effectiveness and national security.

As to the 'one CINC-one mission' proposition, CINCACC would be faced with competing priorities in force acquisition and training. He would have little incentive to make come in on the side of jointness in either of these areas.

In equipping forces, where CINCACC would be faced with great conflict of interest, the tendency could be toward favored programs. How CINCACC would prioritize different programs is obviously speculative, but a look at history doesn't bode well for the joint arena. Despite demonstrated airlift and refueling limitations during Desert Storm, the Air Force continues to put favored programs like B-2 and F-22 ahead of less glamorous programs like C-17 and KC-10.⁴ This is not just a problem of competing AMC and ACC priorities; remember that CINCACC would *also* own both tactical airlift and tankers.

Proponents would undoubtedly argue that since CINCACC would be responsible for all combat air forces, he would make the choices that best enhanced warfighting. Even if that were true, and it hasn't been in the past, there's still a question of where Air Force programs would be prioritized when pitted against a *joint* platform like JSTARS.

The problem with the proponents' arguments is that they fail to transcend the barrier between USAF capabilities and national capability. How CINCACC would make the tough tradeoff between a joint program and an Air Force program is up for debate, but history doesn't come out on the side of jointness.

Training is the other aspect of single commander responsibilities. Joint training is the duty of the commander in whom COCOM is vested, but CINCACC's emphasis would be on enhancing our aerial warfighting capabilities. Again, he would be faced with competing priorities. The argument is that the universal nature of air power calls for standardized training. As with the other supporting arguments this is true for air power applications, but not true for combined arms operations. On the one hand, air-to-air and air-to-ground techniques are universal, but on the other hand the coordination requirements and threat levels in different theaters will likely impact on even those missions. We saw this in Desert Storm, where crews trained to fly low altitude against an East European threat had to fly high to avoid the heavy anti-air threat in Southwest Asia.

Centralized training in CONUS enhances air operations, but does little for theater specific mission training, especially when the Air Force is not the primary focus of effort. CINCPAC missions calling for USAF air support to a main thrust of US Navy power projection missions are but one example. Desert

Storm validated the concept of combined arms action and the invaluable benefits of joint training.⁵ And if history is to be our indicator, it's unlikely ACC would train to those missions. Despite the assignment of USN support missions as USAF collateral functions and numerous agreements between the Air Force and the Navy on joint training, the training has largely failed to materialize.⁶ Joint training with the Army has been better, but there's much room for improvement. This lack of training is not benign. The commander of the 7440th Composite Wing during Desert Storm underscored planning, targeting, and employment limitations directly due to inadequate joint training.⁷

The obvious impediment to improving the training situation is budget authority. Since USAF support to USN is a collateral function, it can't be used to justify budget requests--joint training comes out of hide.⁸ The problem would be exacerbated for CINCACC; his responsibility for training air forces within his command would compete heavily with joint training requirements.

Because competing requirements would degrade our training and force acquisition, the single air power CINC concept fails to justify Specified Command status.

What about the FORSCOM comparison? Supporters argue that the assignment of forces to theater commanders is inconsistent with the regional focus of national security efforts, especially since it's impossible to predict where those forces

will be employed. Supporters propose ACC be a force provider with in-theater assets falling under COCOM of the geographic CINCs; COCOM for all CONUS based assets would held by CINCACC. Under 'normal' conditions, ACC would provide trained forces to theater CINCs, but if necessary, he would have the authority to conduct independent air operations. Here, in at least one respect, the proponents have a valid point.

Within the new National Military Strategy is a concept of US-based contingency forces, responsible for responding from CONUS to a crisis anywhere in the world on short notice.⁹ Especially when secrecy is required (as for covert operations), air power is ideally suited to fulfill this role, with B-2s and F-117s taking the lead. Though the forces would come from only one service, having a single HQ with the ability to plan and execute the mission *does* enhance national warfighting capability.

The disadvantage, of course, is that the theater CINC in whose AOR the operation takes place might not be in the coordination loop, causing considerable consternation. On the whole though, the secrecy and scope of the operation would outweigh this disadvantage. Still, the ability to conduct independent air operations is not sufficient justification for combatant command status.

The other facet of the FORSCOM comparison is the requirement to supply troops to the geographic CINCs in time of crisis. Historical indicators portend problems here. Wartime

experience with SAC shows little willingness to provide bombers and tankers for contingency missions. During Desert Storm, SAC refused to assign forces to CINCCENT, opting instead to offer varying degrees of control from OPCON to TACON for various platforms. Wartime relationships between a theater CINC's Air Component Commander and CINCAAC could be similarly strained, particularly if the Air Component Commander was not an Air Force officer.

All in all, FORSCOM does provide a precedent. Though history has shown strained or non-existent cooperation, the ability to conduct independent air operations from CONUS *would* enhance our warfighting capabilities.

Broad Continuing Mission? A mandatory requirement for a combatant command is a broad continuing mission.¹⁰ Supporters point to the "indivisibility of air power" as a broad continuing mission of air combat forces. This concept hasn't changed since Gen Hoyt Vandenberg coined the phrase in 1951.¹¹ The global applicability of air power is no different than the global applicability of sea power, yet the Navy has no combatant commands in its structure.

Though not explicitly delineated, the underlying concept behind a Specified Command is not just a broad continuing mission but a broad continuing *unique* mission. The new Air Force MAJCOM reorganization tacitly validates that concept. AMC has nearly identical forces and missions (except for the addition of tanker assets) as MAC had. Though Strategic

Airlift is undeniably a broad continuing mission with global applicability, AMC will not be a Specified Command. COCOM will be vested in TRANSCOM, with AMC as a supporting command. STRATCOM, on the other hand, will remain a combatant command and with good reason. In forming the new command, forces were reassigned, leaving only forces unique to the mission. That uniqueness of mission is the ultimate discriminator.

ACC, then, with its composite wings, is left with better capability for the application of air power in combat, but without a particularly unique mission that would validate combatant command status. Without a broad continuing mission, ACC cannot be established as a Specified Command. Nonetheless, proponents argue several advantages to doing so.

The negative impact on warfighting capability may well be reason enough to block establishment of Air Combat Command as a Specified Command--it will undermine unity of effort, a primary principle of war. The principle focus of the Unified Command Plan is on providing for Unity of Effort. Joint publications speak with one voice on this matter: "The first application is **unity of effort*** . Success in war demands that all effort be directed toward the achievement of common aims."¹² "Effective use of the military power of the Nation requires that the efforts of the separate Military Services be closely integrated."¹³ If history is an indicator of future

* Emphasis in the original.

warfighting efforts, there is little doubt there will be problems with unity of effort. In Desert Storm, Lt Gen Horner had to dismiss members of his staff for failure to support the JFACC concept, saying they "didn't understand the idea that we were going to have unity of effort and we were all going to march to the same tune."¹⁴ The problems arose only when another Specified Command--the forces belonged to SAC. In war, absolute unity of effort is mandatory, anything less is unacceptable. Proponents talk about the one force, one commander concept, and cite MAC as an example, saying support to TRANSCOM has been sterling. MAC support has been good, but the comparison is flawed--CINCTrans is the Commander of MAC!

INTERIM SUMMARY

In the end, arguments on both sides of the issue must be weighed as objectively as possible, using combined US military warfighting capability the requisite measure of merit. In the final analysis, establishing Air Combat Command as a Specified Command does not enhance our warfighting capability, but may even degrade it.

The proponents' misplaced arguments strongly endorse the ACC concept. Putting all USAF 'shooters' and primary warfighting support into one command will ensure unity of the air effort and better cooperation among USAF appliers of air power. Assigned to composite wings, forces will plan together and train together. USAF forces will gain greater appreciation for their airborne support assets and will work better together as a result. There remains little doubt that ACC will enhance USAF warfighting capabilities.

Unfortunately, competing priorities and pressure on CINCACC toward USAF programs and air oriented training would undermine our National warfighting competence. Joint mission-specific training would suffer. Coordination procedures would be erratic and fraught with problems. More than anything else, however, the degradation to unity of effort would be unacceptable.

Still, the advantage of being able to conduct independent air operations rapidly from CONUS is a very seductive argument in considering Specified Command status for ACC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ideal arrangement would allow independent air operations without impeding national military power. Such an arrangement is possible. Air Combat Command should be incorporated into the Unified Command Plan as a USAF MAJCOM with supporting command status, similar to the way TAC is now established. When forces are allocated to various warfighting CINCs, however, FORSCOM should be allocated a portion of CONUS-based air assets. The Unified Command Plan allows for such an arrangement: "Although a specified command normally is composed of forces from one Service, it may include units and staff representations from other Services. . . Such allocation, in itself, does not constitute the specified command as a unified command. . ."15 The benefits are many.

First, it meets the intent of Goldwater-Nichols. ACC would supply trained forces to the geographic warfighting CINCs. As a supporting command, Air Combat Command would be responsible for training basic warfighting skills. Air-to-air, air-to-ground, and basic proficiency all fall within this purview. ACC would fulfill the USAF requirement for "preparation of the air forces necessary for the effective prosecution of war and military operations short of war. . ."16 Forces would come under COCOM of theater CINCs, exercised through their Air Component Commanders. As with TAC forces, OPCON for out-of-theater forces would be exercised through ACC.

Secondly, the arrangement integrates perfectly into the

new National Military Strategy.¹⁷ ACC forces assigned to geographic theaters would support forward presence in the Atlantic and Pacific Forces, with joint mission-specific training conducted by the responsible CINC. Air forces would operate with other services under conditions closest to those expected in wartime. The indivisibility of their basic skills would allow personnel to be rotated through theaters as necessary.

Third, Air Forces assigned to FORSCOM would support crisis response in the US-based Contingency Forces and would allow for all the advantages of independent air operations. When the nature of the crisis calls for immediate, flexible response from CONUS, CINCFOR has all the requisite authority to conduct the operation. Only one HQ would be involved in planning and execution, enhancing security and the likelihood of mission success.

Finally, it would firmly establish the identity of ACC assets as a worldwide contingency force, greatly enhancing conventional deterrence. Potential adversaries would have to consider our ability to rapidly apply forces from CONUS at the time and place of our choosing--a credible threat indeed.

The adverse impacts of such an arrangement are minimal and easily overcome. First, assigning air forces to FORSCOM for a long period of time would probably call for it eventually to be established as a unified command instead of a specified command. Such a change would require Presidential approval and

modification of the Unified Command Plan and the "Forces for" document, but such problems are not insurmountable.*

Also, regardless of the eventual FORSCOM status, the FORSCOM staff would have to be expanded to include the creation of an Air Component Commander. This would expand the span of control commensurate with the forces assigned.

Finally, no matter what the arrangement, there will still be competing priorities to overcome. COCOM and OPCON arrangements between ACC as a supporting command and geographic CINCs as supported commands may forever cause conflict. But even under the proponents' proposal, COCOM over USAF assets will be split between theater CINCs who would command in-theater assets and ACC who would command CONUS based forces.

Desert Storm provides indications that having COCOM vested in other than ACC would be the right arrangement. Tactical air forces employed during Desert Storm operated under this kind of command relationship with outstanding success and few problems. In the same environment, strategic air forces under COCOM of a separate specified command undermined unity of effort, impairing warfighting effectiveness.

* "Forces for the Use of Unified and Specified Commanders" is a JCS Publication assigning of forces to various combatant commanders. It does not assign specific units (e.g. 5 BMW), but rather number and type of forces (e.g. 4 Tac Ftr Sqdns)

CONCLUSIONS

The problem of how best to integrate Air Combat Command into the Unified Command Plan is not a moot issue. ACC is due to officially stand up on 1 Jun 92. If ACC is to be established as a Specified Command, the Unified Command Plan and "Forces for" documents must be revised and Presidential approval must be obtained; preparatory actions are certainly underway by Pentagon staff officers.

The debate rages now. The ultimate decision must be based on warfighting principles outlined in the Unified Action Armed Forces: unity of effort, interoperability, and maximum integration of forces. Establishing Air Combat Command as a combatant command does not support those principles. The Air Force knew this when it announced the reorganization:

"The paramount consideration is the theater commander's requirements, not an arbitrary functional division of labor. . . . Thus, the MAJCOM reorganization is another example of a return to basics."¹⁸

It's time to heed their advice and stick to the basics--establishing Air Combat Command as a combatant command is not in the best interests of national security.

FOOTNOTES

1. Neil Munro and Barbara Opall, "Services Slam Air Force Plan," Air Force Times, 20 January 1992, p. 6.
2. Quoted in Munro and Opall, p. 6.
3. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), JCS Pub 0-2, (Washington: 1 December 1986), para 1-6, 1-8.
4. Department of Defense, Conduct of the Persian Gulf Conflict, Interim Report to Congress, (Washington: July 1991), p. 3-5, 18-5.
5. Ibid. p. 4-11, 21-3.
6. Ibid. para 2-17.
Department of the Navy and Department of the Air Force, USAF/USN Memorandum of Agreement on Joint USN/USAF Efforts to Enhance USAF Contribution to Maritime Operations, (Wash.: 1983)
7. Downer, Brig Gen Lee A., "The Composite Wing in Combat," Air Power Journal, Winter 1991, p. 13-14.
8. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), JCS Pub 0-2, (Washington: 1 December 1986), para 2-3.
9. Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Military Strategy for the 1990's, DRAFT, (Washington: 8 October 1991), p. 15.
10. UNAAF. para 3-19, 3-20.
11. Meilinger, Lt Col Philip S., "The Problem With Our Airpower Doctrine," NWC 2155, Naval War College, Newport R.I.
12. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Warfare of the US Armed Forces, Joint Pub 1, (Washington: 11 November 1991), p. 21.
13. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), JCS Pub 0-2, (Washington: 1 December 1986), para 1-1.
14. Quoted in Julie Bird, "Air War Legacy," Air Force Times, 6 January 1992, p. 12.
15. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), JCS Pub 0-2, (Washington: 1 December 1986), para 3-28, 3-30.
16. Ibid. para 2-14.
17. Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Military Strategy for the 1990's, DRAFT, (Washington: 8 October 1991), p. 13.
18. Department of the Air Force, Air Force Restructure, WHITE PAPER, (Washington: September 1991), pg 6.

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ENDNOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the crucial help provided by certain Air Staff sources, without which this analysis would not have been possible. Their information formed the basis for the proponents' arguments cited in the paper. Even when not cited directly, their ideas helped develop the thought process throughout the paper.

The sources have asked to remain unidentified, however, due to the sensitivity of the discussions and their roles in the process. One reason for the sensitivity may be that the Air Force has been reluctant to acknowledge an official push for Specified Command status for ACC. Despite this reluctance, it appears the senior Air Force leadership supports the position. Air Force Times reported (Joe West, "New Force Structure to Stress Peacetime Operations," 6 January 1992, p. 28) that in announcing the reorganization, Gen McPeak spoke of the benefits of ACC and added that forces could conduct their own air campaigns or reinforce an overseas commander. Only a combatant commander has the requisite authority to conduct his "own air campaign". Also, it is highly unlikely that his direct deputy (Lt Gen Nelson, AF/XO) could give the December brief (FOOTNOTE 1) without the Chief's support.